DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 634 TM 030 233

TITLE	Parents' Guide to Classroom Assessment.
INSTITUTION	North Carolina State Dept. of Public Instruction, Raleigh.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Assessment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Guides; *Parents; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Made Tests; *Test Use
IDENTIFIERS	North Carolina

ABSTRACT

Classroom assessment is how teachers find out how well students are learning. It is important because teachers need a lot of information for the decisions they have to make. It can take many forms, such as paper and pencil assessments, performance assessments, conversations, or observations. Classroom assessments are built on clear goals and criteria for quality work so that they can help teachers guide students. A parent should expect that classroom assessments will be clear and reflect what is important in the class. They should provide specific information about what students are learning, and they should use different assessment strategies. Teachers should provide specific and useful feedback, and assessments should focus on thinking and understanding as well as having correct answers. Classroom assessments help teachers require high standards for all students. (SLD)

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PARENTS' GUIDE TO CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

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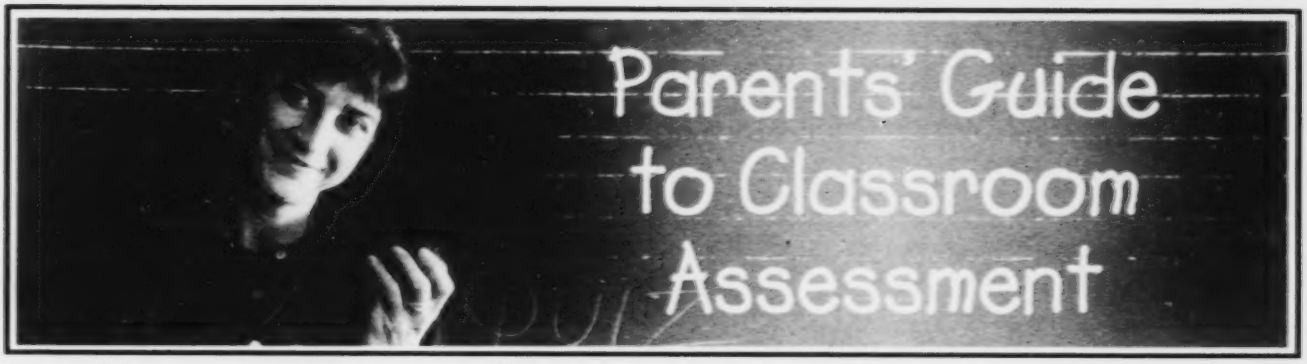

What is classroom assessment?

Classroom assessment is how teachers find out how well students are learning. It is also how teachers get at the thinking and understanding behind students' answers. The word assessment comes from the root word meaning "to sit beside." Classroom assessment involves teachers and students interacting to promote greater student learning.

Teachers are constantly assessing their students informally as well as formally. Through traditional tests, conversations with students, and observing the class at work, teachers gather information that helps them decide what and how to teach next.

Why is classroom assessment important?

Classroom assessment is important because teachers need lots of information for the decisions they have to make. As they begin teaching, they need to find out what students already know and understand related to the goals and objectives of the curriculum. This is basic to a strong instructional program.

As time goes on, teachers need to monitor the progress students are making. Assessment helps teachers make instructional decisions for the class as a whole. It also helps them make decisions about individual students and what type of assistance they need. *On-going monitoring and feedback to students are basic to helping students grow and take responsibility.*

Periodically, teachers judge student work and assign grades. This judgment should be made by comparing the student's achievement with criteria for quality work. It should also make students aware of their progress toward goals even if they are not yet achieving at high levels.

What does quality classroom assessment look like?

Classroom assessment takes many forms. There are many different kinds of goals which students are expected to master, and students learn in different ways. Thus, evidence of student learning must come from a variety of sources.

Pencil and paper assessments include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blanks, short answer, discussion questions, and journals. *Performance assessments* include presentations, projects, applications, and demonstrations. *Conversations* among students or with the teacher take place as students answer probing questions and participate in class discussions or interviews. *Observations*, which can be formal or informal, also provide important information about student learning.

Teachers use assessment to plan for student learning

Assessment is not always for assigning grades. Sometimes it is used to identify what kind of difficulties a student is having. Consider these two children, reading a passage about a cocoon and telling the teacher what the story is about. Both children are struggling readers, but they have two very different comprehension problems. The text of the story is in bold. These examples are taken from an article by Suzanne Wade in *The Reading Teacher* (1990), 43, 442-451.

The first reader jumps to a conclusion early in the story and sticks to that idea, ignoring additional information.

It sat very still, not moving its body, just throwing its head this way and that to toss the silk in the right place.

Teacher: What do you think this could be about?

Student: Mmmmm, maybe a cat.

Teacher: Why do you think it is a cat?

Student: 'Cause of the silk. You know how cats play with yarn.

Finally its home for the winter is done.

Student: The cat has to make a home for itself for the winter.

As it hangs soft and gray in color, it looks like a dead leaf.

Student: Well, it's probably a kitten. Yeah, a kitten.

Teacher: What makes you think that?

Student: Kittens are soft and gray and when they are asleep, they kinda look like they're dead.

It seems to be dead, but inside something wonderful is happening.

Student: I know. It's a mother cat with kittens inside of her.

The second reader does not make connections. For this reader, each paragraph is a separate story.

It sat very still, not moving its body, just throwing its head this way and that to toss the silk in the right place.

Teacher: What do you think this could be about?

Student: Spider.

Teacher: Why do you think it is a spider?

Student: Spiders make silk come out of their bodies. And they stay still sometimes.

Finally its home for the winter is done.

Student: A polar bear!

Teacher: All of these sentences belong together to make a story. Do you still think they have anything to do with a spider?

Student: No.

Teacher: What made you change your mind?

Student: Spiders don't have houses under the ground.

Teacher: Does the story say anything about houses under the ground?

Student: Yes, a polar bear makes a house under the ground to get ready for the winter.

As it hangs soft and gray in color, it looks like a dead leaf.

Student: Opossum!

Teacher: What makes you say opossum?

Student: Because an opossum hangs from its tail.

Through information from these reading assessments, the teacher will plan different instruction for these different students.

Teachers use assessment to monitor learning

In the classroom teachers look for evidence of student understanding in many ways. Sometimes students can follow directions or complete a process without understanding the concepts that underlie the procedure. Teachers use a combination of assessment strategies to monitor student learning.

Tim was a fourth grade student whose worksheets on naming equivalent fractions had all correct answers. The teacher wondered about Tim's puzzled looks during class discussions, yet he made an A on the weekly quiz. She related this story:

I paused by Tim's desk and asked him to explain what an equivalent fraction was.

"It's like this," he replied. "You just multiply the top number and the bottom number by the same thing."

Tim wrote on his paper $^{1}/_{3} \times {}^{3}/_{3} = {}^{3}/_{9}$.

"Could you draw me a picture or explain in another way?" I asked him.

"No," Tim said, "But I can give you another example." He wrote $^{3}/_{4} \times {}^{2}/_{2} = {}^{6}/_{8}$.

I asked him, "If I draw two rectangles that are the same size and I shade one of them to show $^{3}/_{4}$ and shade the other one to show $^{6}/_{8}$, will the same amount be shaded?"

Tim replied, "No, the $^{6}/_{8}$ would have more."

This conversation illustrates how students can sometimes complete a process but not understand underlying concepts.

Classroom conversations can reveal students' understanding

Some ideas are so important that students need to talk about and explore them together. Classroom conversations are likely to deepen understanding and reveal their thinking when students are taught to:

- Support ideas with good reasons
- Give examples to make a point
- Use appropriate vocabulary
- Listen carefully and respectfully
- Respond thoughtfully to other students' ideas

Assessments are built on clear goals and criteria for quality work

Students are more likely to become responsible learners when the goals are clear and they know what quality work looks like. Notice the different strategies used by these teachers.

Ms. Alvarez is a high school history teacher whose students are about to write a research paper. Some of her goals for the assignment are having students find information about a historical event, organize the information, and explain the event from a particular point of view. She begins by showing the class some research papers written by former students. They range from excellent to needing a great deal of work. Students read and talk about the papers, pointing out what is good and what needs improvement. In this way, Ms. Alvarez makes sure that the students know what quality work looks like before they begin their own papers.

Mr. Ruth, a fourth grade teacher, wants to help students learn to explain their thinking. On the board he writes two questions that are similar to ones that students will have on their next science test. By showing students the steps he uses and

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Clear Goals and Criteria Continued...

how he gets the answers, he models for the students the kind of explanation he wants from them. As a class, the students talk about how to answer the second question.

Assessments help teachers give students guidance

Frequent feedback is important to help students know what they have done well and what they need to improve. The more specific the feedback, the more helpful it is to the student. Consider these examples:

- It is helpful to say to the student, "You have used a variety of problem solving strategies correctly; however, the answers are incorrect because you missed number facts involving sevens and nines."
- It is less helpful to say, "You missed 4 problems" or "Your score is 87."
- It is helpful to say, "Your summary was well-organized especially in the places I have marked," rather than saying, "Good paper."

What should you expect in your student's classroom related to assessment?

- Clear descriptions of what students should know, understand and be able to do
- Assessments that reflect what is important, not just what is easy to measure
- Specific information about the progress students are making
- Use of many different assessment strategies
- Examples of quality work or clear guidelines for quality performance
- Feedback to students that is specific and useful
- Assessments that focus on thinking and understanding as well as correct answers
- High standards for all students
- Clear distinction between evaluation of effort and evaluation of achievement